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Killing King Kong: The camera at the borders of the tropical island, 1767-1937

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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of the border of the island as a complex aesthetic zone in the journals of early European and American navigators in the South Seas (such as George Robertson, James Cook, Benjamin Morrell and Charles Wilkes) and in 1920s/1930s American films set on tropical islands. The fascination of the early explorers' descriptions of islands as viewed from the water, across a distance that is physical as much as cultural, resides in the entanglement of perception, expectation and imagination that marks these journeys as both intense and profoundly uncertain visual experiences. In the 1920s, US-American representations of tropical islands gained new currency as American tourists trooped to the South Seas. As I argue, the strong visuality of the early accounts is one of the reasons why cinema could so readily pick up on them. In films like *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1929) and *The Hurricane* (1937), the imaginative transformation in the gaze from the water is associated with the camera as it explores the island in lateral tracking shots. These films cast a critical look on contemporary Western enthusiasm for 'exotic' cultures and locations in which they nevertheless participate. Resonating with contemporary anthropological and documentary film practices, emphasizing authentic representation of native cultures (Malinowski and Flaherty, respectively), they nevertheless point to the camera's own crossing of the island's border as an act of appropriation. This appropriation becomes explicit in *King Kong* (1933) as, armed with cameras and guns, the diegetic film crew violently crosses the borders of/on the island. Significantly, it is only after Kong's death at the highest point of another island (Manhattan) and at another border, now between land and sky, that he fascinates the masses as an aesthetic spectacle. The film, then, meditates on the relations between border crossing, death and the production of aesthetics.

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KILLING KING KONG: THE CAMERA AT THE BORDERS OF THE TROPICAL ISLAND, 1767-1937

Johannes Riquet

One need only open any travel brochure to see that South Sea island fantasies of pristine beaches, coconut trees and vast expanses of water still have high currency. David Vann's novel *Caribou Island* (2011) puts this fantasy to striking use. The novel is about a couple trying to rebuild their failed lives and marriage by building a cabin on an island in Alaska. The project fails and the island – never exactly pleasant – turns into a nightmarish site as the woman first kills her husband and then herself. The novel ends with the daughter approaching the island, ignorant of what has happened. On the boat, she fantasizes about her wedding on a Hawaiian island, a wedding she has been dreaming of for a while although the relationship with her future husband is doomed to fail:

Rhoda would end this, bring them home. And then she would focus on what she needed to be doing, planning her wedding. A green, sunny bluff over blue ocean far away from here. [...] Walking the beach in her wedding dress, holding Jim's arm, her parents and Mark following behind [...] A place carefree, a day she had dreamed of all her life, the beginning, finally. (293)

As we learn earlier in the novel, Rhoda's dream is nourished by travel brochures promoting lofty visions of Pacific bliss: "*As the sun kisses the horizon and you are bathed in golden light, your vows are lifted by eternal trade winds and scattered over a million miles of Pacific*" (138; emphasis original). At the end of the novel, this fantasy re-emerges, but its inaccessibility becomes even more pronounced through its ironic juxtaposition with the grim reality Rhoda is about to encounter: approaching a dark, dismal island, Rhoda dreams of another, bright island. We thus become aware of the utopian quality of the second island: it provides a unifying fantasy in the face of a disintegrating family, screening off disunity and death. Crucially, Rhoda is still at a certain distance from the island. Approaching its border, she cannot yet *see* beyond it in detail; the border thus becomes an aesthetic zone activating projective fantasies that mask a darker reality.

The South Sea island fantasy of *Caribou Island* is connected to an aesthetic tradition that goes back to the accounts of the European explorers in the Pacific in the 18th century and was adapted to specific American contexts by explorers, travellers, novelists and filmmakers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the 1920s and 30s, US-American representations of tropical islands gained new currency as American tourists trooped to the more and more accessible South Seas. This article will develop a framework for reading Hollywood island films of the time in relation to this aesthetic tradition, arguing that it is in part the very visuality of the earlier texts that facilitated their transformation into cinematic fantasies. My argument will be theoretically informed by K. R. Howe's claim that "the world of the Pacific islands [...]" is as much a rhetorical device, an intellectual artifact, as it is a physical or

cultural location” (1-2) and Dennis Porter’s analysis of the ways travel writing is often haunted by the voices of previous travellers in *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. After two initial examples that will demonstrate the pervasiveness of these island visions in 1920s and 1930s U.S. culture, I will trace the genesis of this cultural trope by examining the way a highly aestheticized image of the tropical island travelled from the journals of the early explorers in the late 18th century (Robertson, Cook, Banks, Bougainville) through a plethora of 19th-century texts into the cultural imaginary of the United States in the early 20th century. I will end by discussing three important films which centre around imaginary tropical islands: *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928), *The Hurricane* (1937) and, finally, *King Kong* (1933). It will be shown that the border of the island plays a seminal role in both the journals and the films as an aesthetic zone across which the island is imagined. Accordingly, this article will focus on the ways the island emerges as an aesthetic object when imagined from the far side of this border. As I will demonstrate, this mediation of perception across the border of the island has been a central part of Western representations of tropical islands ever since the accounts of the early Europeans, and finds both its epitome and transformation in Hollywood’s island fantasies in the early 20th century.

Islands in the U.S. cultural imaginary: tourism, cinema, fantasy

As a New York Times article from 1921 states: “The extreme popularity of the South Seas, which grows like a snowball from month to month, has, according to certain eminent authorities, brought the danger of congestion to those islands” (*The New York Times*, 21 August 1921). This development coincided with an explosion of travel accounts, novels and films about South Sea islands. The historical reasons for this “exodus to Tahiti”, as a *NYT* article from 1921 calls it, were manifold. One of them was to provide an escapist fantasy responding to the unsettling experience of World War I; contemporary voices said that South Sea island narratives were “delightfully far removed from the atmosphere and the scene of the great war” (*NYT*, 25 April 1920). In a recent study, Jeffrey Geiger argues that the post-war period was a “time of profound, collective self-interrogation for Europe and the US. In the wake of a brutal war, civilization seemed to signify the opposite of progress” (2007, 69). Geiger goes on to argue that social changes like urbanization, fast transport and modern communication also created a reaction against the perceived ills of civilization and a nostalgic desire for a closer link to nature and a simpler way of life. The pervasive textual and cinematic fantasy of the South Sea island offered to fulfill these desires. A letter to the editor published in an issue of *The New York Times* from 1926 reads as follows:

South Sea Idyll

To the Editor of the New York Times:

He was alone. He stepped softly to the porthole and peered out. All was quiet. An inky blackness met his gaze. As he strained his eyes for the first glimpse of light his patience was rewarded. Slowly a faint glow appeared directly in front of him. Gradually it spread and the sun crept over an island that seemed to be about two miles ahead.

Dawn in the tropics. He could almost hear the gentle wash of the waves on the distant beach. He had written so much of the South Sea Islands – and he knew dramaturgy. He watched intently for a few moments, then heaved a sigh of relief.

Everything was all right. Suddenly he cursed and turned to the machine at his side. The picture was out of frame again.

He was the operator in a movie theatre. (25 March, 1926)

By tricking the reader into believing that he is describing a real island in the South Seas, the text draws attention to two things: first, it indicates the markedly visual dimension at work in the representation of tropical islands. Second, it points towards the extent popular conceptions of tropical islands are aestheticized projections, cinematic or otherwise. Again, the distance from the island is crucial: the distance from boat to island is equated with the distance to the film screen; the gaze through the porthole is the gaze through the projectionist's own "porthole", linked with the gaze through the lens of a camera that mediates perception. The island thus emerges as an initially uncertain visual phenomenon that gradually takes shape in front of the camera and the mind's eye; the "dawn in the tropics" is associated with the light of film shining up from the dark space of the cinema.

In Frank Capra's screwball comedy *It Happened one Night* (1934), a similar Pacific island fantasy is expressed. A young, rich woman escapes from her father and ends up travelling with a cynical journalist; at nights, he erects a screen to divide the room for propriety. Towards the end of the film, the woman asks Peter about his ideas on love, which Peter answers with an idealized island vision. Crucially, he states that he "*saw* an island in the Pacific once" (my emphasis), not that he ever was on one, which makes it quite likely that the island is in fact one he saw in a movie theatre. His vision is vague and generic, but marks a turning point in the film: the girl crosses the boundary erected between them. The film being made shortly after the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code¹, it is clear what particular boundary is here metaphorically being crossed. The island fantasy is thus linked to a partly illicit sexual desire, also signalled by the violation of the 180-degree rule. This link had played an important role since the accounts of Polynesian sexual licence by explorers like Wallis or Cook.²

Islands on the horizon: the journals of the early explorers in the Pacific

When the H.M.S. *Dolphin*, commanded by Captain Samuel Wallis, emerged from the Straits of Magellan and headed for the open waters of the Pacific on 12th April 1767, it entered an area of the globe that was still barely known to European minds despite the fact that the Spaniards, most notably Pedro Fernandez de Quirós, had already navigated these waters almost two hundred years earlier. For several weeks, Wallis and the crew sailed across wide expanses of water without encountering land

¹ The Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, was a system of Hollywood self-censorship first introduced in 1930 and firmly established in 1934. Among other things, the Production Code prohibited representations of sexuality.

² At the same time, this island fantasy of the early 30s is part of a depression-era escapist fantasy characterizing the screwball comedy in general.

and, more importantly, without knowing when and where they would do so. It was a period of intense uncertainty for the British sailors. The journal of the *Dolphin*'s master, George Robertson, makes this uncertainty clear: in a period in which very little happened at all, minor events such as sightings of flying fish, birds or seaweed took on increased significance in potentially pointing to land and triggering hopes. The longer the journey continued, the more intense the hopes, fears and wishes of the sailors became. In a revealing passage, Robertson describes their yearning for land:

[A]bout Noon some of our Men Supposed they saw land but was Mistaken – at this time we was all Earnestly wishing to fall in with some well Inhabited Country [...] and Every man wishd to find what he liked most, some wanted to find Good Beef, others Sheep or Hogs [...] Oythurs that was hearty and well wished for wild Game, Gold, Silver, Diamonds Pearls & some for fine young Girls. (1948, 113)

Interestingly, the account of the erroneous sighting of land is here directly followed by a description of the various fantasies the sailors invested in the imagined lands beyond the horizon. An imaginary gaze replaces the frustration of real perception, and the apparent sighting of land itself takes on the status of a mirage produced partly by the desire to see itself. Crucially, the fantasies commonly associated with the European explorers of the Pacific – fantasies of fertility, abundant riches and sexual fulfillment – emerge even before the first landfall, which corroborates Howe's important point that these were in fact nothing but a "rerun of a very old Western theme" (2000, 14); as Howe points out, these visions of paradise in fact go back to early Indo-European golden-age fantasies that are present in Indian mythology, Greek myths of Arcadia and Elysium and the Judeo-Christian myth of the Garden of Eden (8-14).

In Robertson's diary, these fantasies are activated at the very moment when the possibility of land beyond the horizon becomes possible, but when perception is still uncertain. In his insightful philosophical treatise *The Horizon: A History of Our Infinite Longing*, Didier Maleuvre engages precisely with this zone "where perception fades off" (2011, 2) and its importance in Western cultural history. "All historical knowledge", Maleuvre writes, "pushes against a horizon, and the journey of history itself is both a conquest and a forced march toward the open unknown" (2). The European explorers of the Pacific in the late 18th century engaged in such a march, and part of the fascination of their journals resides in the entanglement of perception, expectation and imagination that marks these journeys as both intense and profoundly uncertain visual experiences. Islands occupy a central role in this, and the most vibrant and spectacular parts of the journals are often those that describe them from the water, from a distance. Again, Maleuvre's reflections on the horizon are useful in this context: "[T]he more we know how limitedly we see, the more our imagination ventures beyond the blurry boundary, and the more we realize how bound-in-a-nutshell we are" (1).

There is an intimate connection between those evident uncertainties of perception arising when it is not clear whether a blurry patch on the horizon consists of clouds or of solid land, and the projective investment in islands whose existence is

already established when they are intensely viewed from the water. Journal accounts of Pacific voyages of discovery abound in the former; both the low-lying coral islands such as those of the Tuamotu Archipelago and the high volcanic islands such as Tahiti are well known for their potential of visual deception for sailors approaching them. The countless mythical or phantom islands (and, importantly, the notion of an immensely rich southern continent, or *Terra Australis Incognita*) appearing in countless explorers' accounts and contemporary maps played their part in producing uncertainty and structuring perception. In the journals of both Robertson and Sir Joseph Banks, naturalist on board James Cook's *Endeavour*, which entered the waters of the Pacific two years after Wallis in 1769, the first appearance of Tahiti is marked by uncertainty: "[W]e saw the Appearance of a very high land to the Southward but the weather being so thick and hazy we could not see it plain Enough to know it for certain" (Robertson, 1948, 130). As the existence of the land is ascertained, the sailors are "fild [...] with the greatest hopes Imaginable" (135), but their perception is simultaneously mediated by myth and desire: "[W]e now suposed we saw the long wishd for Southern Countinent, wich has been often talkd of, but neaver before seen by any Europeans" (135). Banks relates a similar uncertainty relating to the first sighting of Tahiti: "At this time it remaind in dispute whether what had been so long seen to the Westward was realy land or only vapours" (2006, 69). Not having perceived any land himself, Banks is forced to admit in the next day's entry that the more numerous "non-seers" (69) had been wrong: "I found the fault was in our eyes yesterday" (69). Conversely, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville describes several apparent sightings of islands that turned out to be a mere "land of clouds" (2002, 85) in his *Pacific Journal* detailing his voyage from 1767-1768.

The initial descriptions of islands viewed from the water, across a distance that is physical as much as cultural, bespeak a similar, but even more pronounced epistemological uncertainty. In the introduction to his *Nature, Culture, History: The "Knowing" of Oceania*, which examines the way Western perceptions of Pacific islands have always been mediated by specific "cultural lenses" (2000, 1), Howe begins by posing a question: "How do we know what we see?" (1) In many ways, the early Pacific journals pose the same question. When Sir Joseph Banks describes the first island of the Tuamotu Archipelago the *Endeavour* passed after weeks on open water, he depicts the natives and the island itself:

They appeard to us through our glasses to be tall and to have very large heads or possibly much hair upon them [...] Under the shade of these [palms] were the houses of the natives in places cleared of all underwood so that pleasanter groves can not be imagind, at least so they appeared to us whose eyes had so long been unus'd to any other objects than water and sky. (2006, 65)

Banks stresses the mediation of perception by drawing attention to the binoculars through which the natives were viewed. Banks here demonstrates considerable awareness of the distortions potentially arising from this gaze by using words such as "appeard" and "possibly". The second part of the excerpt stresses a vision of Arcadian happiness, but is immediately followed by a qualifying remark that

emphasizes the possible unreliability of the observers' eyes by admitting the possibility of their gaze being distorted by desire. In the entire passage, then, Banks expresses a caution about both optical lenses and "cultural lenses", indeed forging a link between the two, admitting the *Endeavour* to be – in more than one sense – "at so great a distance that all must be conjecture" (66), to borrow a phrase from his description of the second island encountered in the Tuamotu Archipelago.

Banks also demonstrates awareness of an effect commonly encountered in South Sea accounts and that Porter terms a "sense of belatedness in a traveler, especially a traveler who decides to give a written account of his travels" (1991, 12). Porter argues that "there is a sense of *déjà vu* that is to be understood in part through the theory of the uncanny" (12) and that manifests itself partly as an "anxiety of travel writing" (12), a sense of inevitably following in the footsteps of previous travellers that inform and haunt the traveller's own writing. Banks strikingly expresses this when he describes the *Endeavour*'s approach to the Australian east coast on 22 April 1770:

In the morn we stood in with the land near enough to discern 5 people who appeared through our glasses to be enormously black: so far did the prejudices which we had built on Dampiers account influence us that we fancied we could see their Colour when we could scarce distinguish whether or not they were men. (2006, 260)

Again, Banks describes a gaze that is doubly mediated: the gaze through the binoculars is linked with a gaze that is shaped by previous written accounts; the explorers are described as seeing through their predecessors' eyes, with all the implications of racial inferiority the reference to the blackness of the natives carried at the time. Even more striking, however, is Banks's reflection on this circumstance: the use of the word "prejudice" and the comment following it testify to a critical distance of the writing self from the observing self.

The scene just discussed is revealing for yet another reason, for it initiates a long and intense exchange of gazes between the sailors of the *Endeavour* and the natives on shore that went on for almost a week before the former first landed, and which constitutes the central concern of Banks's account of this period. The early Pacific journals are full of such exchanges; large sections of texts are often devoted to the careful scanning of an unknown coast that sometimes went on for days before landing, and the texts bespeak a heightened anxiety as well as a reluctance to cross the border of the island or of the ship; sometimes on the part of the Europeans, sometimes on the part of the natives, and often on both sides. Before the *Dolphin* landed in Matavai Bay on 26th June 1767 "to take possession of this Beautyfull Island" (Robertson, 1948, 159), Wallis and his crew slowly sailed along the shore of Tahiti, observing and speculating on the natives who in turn are described by Robertson as lined up on the shore to observe the English discoverers, as cautiously circling the ship in their canoes as Wallis circled the island (135-159). This exchange of gazes was occasionally interrupted by trading activities, and on two occasions by skirmishes on water. In the first instance, a Tahitian was shot as two canoes appeared "fully resolved to board [them]" (145); the second time, the Englishmen opened fire

on the Tahitians after the latter had started a surprise attack by throwing stones at the *Dolphin*. Whatever the exact reasons for the skirmishes – mutual misunderstanding of the others' motives partly seem to account for it – they mark a violent infringement of the border as stones and guns replace gazes. Vanessa Smith points out that “the strongest trope of the harbour welcome as described in Pacific exploration literature is incomprehension. [...] Europeans and Polynesians hold each other during arrival scenes in island harbours, bays and anchorages in the equilibrium of mutual regard” (2003, 117). James Cook's journal provides similar instances of such a probing gaze: “[S]everal of the Natives came off to us in their Canoes, but more to look at us than any thing else we could not prevail with any of them to come on board and some would not come near the Ship” (Cook, 1955, 73). The two outbreaks of violence between the crew of the *Dolphin* and the Tahitians broke this equilibrium of looking as boundaries were crossed by stones and gunshots; it may be no coincidence that the second, more momentous skirmish was almost directly followed by preparations for landing.

Landing was followed by a declaration of peace on the part of the natives, yet the crossing of the border of the island was immediately followed by the establishment of a new border: establishing themselves on one side of the river, the Englishmen carefully policed its crossing. Thus, for instance, initially only very few natives were allowed to cross the river for trading purposes. As Smith points out,

representations of island encounters by shipboard visitors explore and metaphorise the psychologies of arrival and departure more explicitly than do descriptions of cross-cultural contact in continental settings. Both are enacted through a series of explicit crossings, staged traversals of distinct media: water, sand, land. (2003, 116)

As in Robertson's account, the physical features of island geography thus take on symbolic dimensions as natural border zones are turned into symbolic borders across which intercultural contact is negotiated. Banks even describes the erection of a boundary that is purely symbolic. While the Englishmen set up a camp on shore, Banks “drew a line before them with the butt end of [his] musquet and made signs to them to set down without it” (73).

American re-vision and the freezing of the gaze: Porter, Wilkes, Morrell

The same gesture is described in the journal of Captain David Porter, who was sent to the Pacific by the US government from 1812 to 1814 to “annoy the enemy” (Porter, 1822, 1), i.e. the British, during the War of 1812. Porter spent several months on the island of Nukuhiva in the Marquesas, where he fought two wars against native tribes, first the Happahs and then the Typees. Between the two wars, Porter describes examining the coast to the westward of the village erected for the Americans by the natives. Upon landing, he performs the same symbolic action as Banks on Tahiti some forty years earlier:

On landing, many of the natives came to the beach, who seemed disposed to treat us in the most friendly manner; but apprehensive of being troubled by

their numbers, I drew a line in the sand, at some distance about the boats, and informed them they were *tabooed*. (82; emphasis original)

Yet if the journals of Robertson and Banks oscillate, often self-critically, between conflicting perceptions and assessments of the Pacific islands and their inhabitants, Porter's narrative is more closed. Suspicion is here constitutive; the treachery of the natives is taken for granted. The gradually attained peace with all the tribes of the island as described by Porter is a peace based on demonstrations of power and military subjection. While Porter often talks of the natives in admiring terms and describes intimate friendships with them, his text is structured by deep-seated distrust: he never quite manages to free himself from the sense that the natives would turn against the Americans should the latter's superiority be questioned. In a sense, then, Porter never really crosses the border of the island and the line he draws in the sand. The only way he crosses over into the cultural space of the island is by destroying it, most notably in his devastation of the Typee valley. Porter turns the island into an American space by means of violence, annihilating the space of the natives and subjugating the island to the American flag. This is in line with a development described by Howe according to which "the Pacific islands and their peoples by definition became that dangerous or unpleasant other" in the 19th century, regarded "with fear and loathing" (Howe, 2000, 15) by the West as the latter strove to assume economic and political control of the region.

Of course this view represents a generalization and individual accounts often resist easy categorization. It also does not follow that visions of paradise had disappeared from accounts of Pacific islands. Yet by the time American vessels entered the Pacific for military purposes and for reasons of discovery and commercial exploitation, these visions had changed. Paradise found had turned into paradise lost (cf. Howe 13-21, Lyons 2006, Geiger 2007). The following excerpt is taken from Benjamin Morrell's fanciful *Narrative of Four Voyages*, in which he describes his explorations and commercial ventures from 1822-1831, many of which took him to the Pacific:

[W]e counted more than seventy islands, of different sizes, situated within its circle, the appearance of which was truly paradisiacal and delightful. It was realizing, as far as the eye could judge, all that poets have dreamed of "happy isles," fairyland, &c. [...] But I could not rest contented with merely viewing these happy isles at a distance, shut out, as it were, by an envious wall impassable as adamant. (1832, 379)

This first description of a group of islands named "Bergh's Group"³ by Morrell in 1830 picks up on the notion of paradise, but the entire account, which goes on for about three pages, is strangely distanced, even when Morrell describes entering the reef. As Morrell himself points out, this is paradise viewed from a distance, and the wall of adamant remains truly impassable; when Morrell records his second voyage to Bergh's Group half a year later, he describes leaving the island in haste after a stay

³ The islands of Morrell's "Bergh's Group" are probably the Chuuk Islands in Micronesia.

of three days when the Americans began to suspect “treachery and impending hostilities” (434).

The disillusioning experience of approaching a Pacific island is thematized even more directly in Charles Wilkes’s account of the United States Exploring Expedition commanded by him (1838-1842), the first large-scale US voyage of discovery and scientific exploration to the South Seas and the Southern Ocean:

The landing on a coral island effectually does away with all the preconceived notions of its beauty, and any previous ideas formed in its favor are immediately put to flight. That verdure which seemed from a distant view to carpet the whole island, was in reality but a few patches of wiry grass [...]. (1851, 127)

In this description, which refers to Wilkes’s experience in the Tuamotu Archipelago, Wilkes explicitly exposes the aestheticized look at the South Sea island as a fallible vision emerging from “preconceived notions”; this effect of seeing structured by expectation is said to occur only if the beholder is at a distance. Wilkes’s description of the approach to Tahiti seems to express a slightly different stance:

The beauty of the distant view of Tahiti has been celebrated by all navigators, but I must confess that it disappointed me. The entire outline of the island was visible for too short a time, and at too great distance to permit its boasted features to be distinctly seen. (142)

As in the former passage, however, Wilkes here engages in a re-vision of the Pacific island. He contests the gaze of his predecessors and exposes it as illusory, which may be partly motivated by a desire to set himself apart from the British discoverers and establish an original American gaze.

So far, then, the analysis of the poetics of the Pacific island as viewed from a distance in the British and American explorers’ journals has demonstrated two things: in different ways, they all foreground an intense visuality in their construction of the island as an imaginary space and are thus, as it were, cinematic *avant la lettre*. And secondly, this gaze is always a mediated one: whether seeing through their predecessors’ eyes or challenging their vision, the texts point to earlier visions and fantasies structuring their own. And these images were extremely resilient: if Wilkes criticized the illusory visions of the Pacific island predominant in earlier texts, these visions, as discussed initially, reemerged at full tilt in the American cinema of the 1920s, coinciding with the rise of South Sea tourism. The islands tourists saw often were not the islands the natives saw, as Miriam Kahn points out in *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*: “These two groups [...] seemed to operate in two parallel, but disconnected worlds” (2011, 15).

The making of the American Pacific archive

And of course the earlier visions, though reformulated and transformed, had never quite disappeared. The discussion so far has thus paved the way for an understanding of Hollywood’s island fever in the early twentieth century. I am interested in the way

the South Sea island images were produced by a complex ideological apparatus that structured their perception; explorers' accounts, paintings, tourist ads, travelogues, films and newspaper articles all contributed to the production of a particular vision of island space, along the lines theorized by Henry Lefebvre: "The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space [...] it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (Lefebvre, qtd. in Eperjesi, 2005, 4). The "American Pacific archive," so termed by Paul Lyons (2006), helped produce this space: a large body of accounts of the Pacific that formed a textual universe of its own. Porter's claim that travel writing is characterized by a textual haunting in which writers posit themselves as retracing the footsteps of their predecessors through whose eyes they view the islands, if only to assert their own re-vision, is possibly even more valid for this "archive" than in the case of their British predecessors; thus, one *NYT* review of a travelogue in 1930 points out that despite "individual coloring [...] even here the reader is haunted by the memory of Robert Louis Stevenson's poignant descriptions" (*NYT*, 16 November, 1930).

Both Lyons and Kahn argue that these aestheticized accounts also served to mask the realities of US imperialist expansion in the Pacific (Lyons, 2006, 27 and Kahn, 2011, 9-17). As John R. Eperjesi points out, US imperial activity already played a crucial role throughout the 19th century as Pacific islands were used as refuelling and repair stations for the fur trade to China and whaling ships, and then also as trading centres in their own right as Americans began to exploit the islands for products such as *bêche-de-mer*, sandalwood and copra (2005, 25-57). In the late 19th century American imperialism took a turn towards more direct control, beginning with the annexation of Hawaii in 1898 and the American-Filipino War shortly after. Around this time, notions of the Pacific as an extension of the Western frontier were becoming widespread, and the expansion into the Pacific was linked with myths of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny (cf. Eperjesi, 2005, 25-57 and Lyons, 2006, 24-34); as late as 1931, a guidebook reviewed in the *NYT* referred to the South Seas as "the last frontier" (*NYT*, 18 October, 1931). The South Sea craze of the early 20th century partly masks these activities. A *Los Angeles Times* article from 1925 entitled "The Romance of the Island Pineapple" perfectly illustrates this mechanism: the article begins with an aesthetic vista positing an observer "looking down at the incomparable scene spread beneath" in the typical manner of South Sea accounts. The view includes pineapple plantations, which triggers a description of the history of the pineapple industry as it was developed by US entrepreneurs who are, at the end of the article, described as "men who had faith, courage and vision. Who says romance is dead in the islands of the Pacific?" (*LAT*, 1 January, 1925). In this way, economic activity is aestheticized and reinscribed as romance. By the 1930s, these images permeated everyday life to the extent that in 1935 a series of stamps was issued with titles like "dancing girls", "palm-fringed beaches" and "cannibals" (*LAT*, 3 March, 1935), and in 1937 the *LAT* advertised a lipstick "in five new tropical shades as fascinating as the South Sea islands themselves" (*LAT*, 10 October, 1937). Tourism and cinema were close allies in the promotion of these images and mutually propelled each other; it is no coincidence that during a visit to Los Angeles in 1929 Oscar G. Nordman, publisher of an American newspaper on Tahiti and president of the Pacific Tourist Bureau, was

entertained in Hollywood by filmmakers whom he had met while they were shooting in Tahiti (*LAT*, 25 May, 1929).

Hollywood's Pacific island: *White Shadows in the South Seas* and *The Hurricane*

Around the same time, MGS's *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928), loosely based on Frederick O'Brien's bestseller travelogue of the same title and directed by W. S. Van Dyke and Robert Flaherty, was released. The film opens with a series of almost still images displaying classic South Sea island iconography: an island seen from above, a beach, palm trees, a native in a canoe, still water, with intertitles declaring the islands to be "the last remnant of an earthly paradise". After this opening vision of the islands before the fall, the camera laterally tracks along the shore from left to right, showing some marks of white civilization. The shot is announced by intertitles that place them in a relation of contrast with the vistas: "But the white man, in his greedy trek across the planet, cast his withering shadow over these islands." After intertitles announcing "Today – the results of 'civilization'", the camera moves in the other direction, showing us paradise lost, corrupted by the West. The status of the first tracking shot poses considerable interpretive difficulties: if it represents neither the island in its prelapsarian ideal *nor* present-day reality, what is it that we see? The answer must lie, quite literally, somewhere in between: blending the ideal island-image with the view of the fallen island, it speaks to and performs the fundamental uncertainty of vision structuring the West's – and Hollywood's – perception of the South Sea island(s).



White Shadows in the South Seas (1928): the two lateral tracking shots of the island

The crucial difference between the two tracking shots is that the camera is positioned on a boat in the first shot, exploring the island from the water. Again a certain *distance* from the island is linked to an imaginative view of what is on the other side of its border. This is counteracted by the second shot, which depicts present-day reality; now the camera has moved across the border. These first shots mirror the overall trajectory of the film. A greedy white pearl trader places a disillusioned doctor, Matthew Lloyd, on a schooner full of plague victims to get rid of him. Lloyd is shipwrecked on an island that is the unspoiled home of islanders unaware of white civilization. He becomes part of the idealized island society and involved with a native woman, but has a weak moment of greed for pearls during which he makes a fire that attracts the ship of the same trader who had expelled him. Lloyd tries to

prevent the whites' contact with the natives, but fails and is killed. The film ends with shots of the same white debauchery we saw in the second tracking shot of the first island at the beginning of the film. While manifestly anti-colonial, the film nevertheless carries a problematic ideological message, representing islanders as passive victims; it engages in an essentializing fantasy of a "myth of a people frozen in time" (Geiger, 2007, 1). The central part of the film, which has been interpreted as a dream sequence (Geiger, 2007, 176), actualizes the nostalgic vision conjured up in the first tracking shot. The film can thus also be read as a ritual enactment and purging of a Western sense of guilt: as the history of Western intrusion into paradise is doubled within the narrative, the white subject is split into good and evil, and the guilt for the corruption of paradise is safely located in the pearl trader.



The Hurricane (1937): gazing at imaginary islands

John Ford's *The Hurricane* (1937) opens in a very similar way. Gazing at the devastated island of Manukura, another former island doctor is joined by a young woman, an enthusiastic South Sea island tourist. Again, the island is explored from across the water in a lateral tracking shot along its border and there is a tension between an unsatisfying present and an ideal version of the island. But this time, we first get the island-as-ruin; as the young woman quotes one of her travel folders ("The South Sea island – the last hiding place of beauty and adventure"), we see her flushed face gazing away from the ship, seemingly at the island of her dreams. Yet the next shot, taken from behind the two characters, reveals still the same barren island. Only after a while does the woman's face show that she has noticed it at all. Even then, she first rejects the reality at hand, privileging that of the tourist folders ("nothing like that is mentioned in the folders"): since such an island figures in none of them, it simply cannot exist. The doctor goes on to evoke the lost beauty of the island, before the film seemingly jumps back and we see the beginning of the tracking shot again, but this time without an observing presence; the image of the barren island soon dissolves into a tracking shot of the island in its prime, and the main narrative begins. The point here is that both observers already see a version of the island in its full beauty *before* the film makes it available to the spectator. They invest the far side of the border with an aesthetic dimension despite, or rather because of, its manifest absence. The rest of the film shows us the devastation of the island by a hurricane in detail. The main difference to *White Shadows* is that

responsibility for the destruction of paradise is shifted away entirely from human agents and assigned to nature, although the coincidence of the hurricane with the escalation of conflicts between colonial authority and natives marks this as an ideological operation.

In both *White Shadows* and *The Hurricane*, the paradisiacal quality of the island is absent, and only an aesthetic transformation makes it present. My argument rests on the assumption that the imaginative transformation in the gaze from the water that is such an important part of 18th- and 19th-century accounts of Pacific islands is one of the reasons why cinema could so readily pick up on this tradition; in a way, these fantasies were cinematic before the advent of cinema. In films like *White Shadows* and *The Hurricane*, this imaginative act is associated with the camera and with cinema.

Invading the island: ethnography, film, and the death of King Kong

The films share this gesture with emerging documentary film practices. Before working on *White Shadows*, Robert Flaherty had made two ethnographic films: *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), portraying Inuit life and life on a South Sea island, respectively. *Moana* was the film of which John Grierson said it had “documentary value” (Grierson, qtd. in Barsam, 1988, 42), the first time this term was used to describe a film. Yet in both films, Flaherty conjured up a vision that had little to do with the everyday life of the subjects he filmed, staging an imagined past and customs that had long disappeared for the camera. Flaherty left *White Shadows* before completion because the co-operation with Van Dyke didn’t work; yet the film remains indebted to the gesture and style of his films.

But Flaherty also shared this gesture with the emerging discipline of anthropology. In *Tristes Tropiques*, a belated account of his time in the tropics in the 1930s, Claude Lévi-Strauss famously stated: “Je voudrais avoir vécu au temps des vrais voyages, quand s’offrait dans toute sa splendeur un spectacle non encore gâché, contaminé et maudit” (1955, 44). Yet Lévi-Strauss only makes this statement in order to question it: he concludes that travellers are always doomed to miss the spectacle of the present in the search for a lost, idealized past. But the salvage anthropologists of the 1920s and 30s, such as Margaret Mead, often lacked Lévi-Strauss’s theoretical sophistication. The first scientific anthropological studies were studies of tropical islands, such as the Torres Strait expedition of 1898 and Bronislaw Malinowski’s study of the Trobriand Islands in the 1910s. Because of their bounded nature, islands seemed to offer ethnographers ideal field conditions for their goal of complete observation. Desiring to grasp a culture in its totality, these anthropologists were often prone to essentializing views in their efforts to preserve vanishing cultures. It is no coincidence that, as Lyons notes (2006, 142), Margaret Mead’s beginning of her 1928 study of Samoa sounds like a romantic travelogue: “As the dawn begins to fall among the soft brown roofs and the slender palm trees stand out against a colourless, gleaming sea, lovers slip home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in shadow of beached canoes” (Mead, 2001, 12). The iconography is as close as it gets to the opening images of *White Shadows*. In fact, cameras were often an integral part of ethnographers’ attempts to record a foreign culture, a practice that

goes back as far as the drawings of South Sea islands and natives by the artists accompanying Cook's voyages for purposes of visual documentation.

Released in 1933 and directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong* resonates with all of the issues addressed so far. The expedition of a film crew, led by director Carl Denham, to a hitherto undiscovered, mythical tropical island in the Indian Ocean, the reputed home of a monstrous native deity named Kong, is both a modern cinematic enterprise and echoes the early voyages of discovery. For the unemployed Ann Darrow, whom the director found while she was trying to steal from a grocery store and hires as his new star, the voyage is an escape from depression-era misery into the glamour of both the tropics and Hollywood. The director's sensationalist desire is linked to travellers' yarns and tourist fantasies as well as to an ethnographic desire to record the other and the past. Shortly before arrival, we see the film team staring into dense fog from a ship, speculating about the island; their intense gaze testifies to their imaginative activity, so that the island, emerging suddenly after a fade-out, seems to spring right from their visions although the fade-out of course also signals the passing of the night. As the team lands, armed with camera and guns, the impossibility of observation and recording without interference is made clear. A central tension that Malinowski can never quite resolve in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is the mutual cancelling out of two of his requirements: the ethnographer has to become part of the native community in order to faithfully record it, yet he must not enter into active relations with the natives because that would transform the situation and render impartial observation impossible (cf. Malinowski, 2002, 1-25).

King Kong negotiates precisely this problem. The team's scopophilic desire to see, repeating the intense gazes into the fog, manifests itself again as they are shown gazing through long grass at a native ceremony shortly after landing and Ann says "I want to see". This desire finds its logical continuation in the filming of the ceremony, but the latter is interrupted and the course of events irrevocably changed as the natives notice the team: as their shaman explains, the ceremony has been spoiled because the film team has seen it. In the following scenes, guns replace cameras as Kong is finally captured and brought to Broadway: on the island, the film team crosses a second boundary, the high wall separating the natives from the realm of Kong, in order to save their abducted star from the giant creature's grip. If the intrusive presence of the camera, paradoxically both recording and interfering in paradise, is implicit in *White Shadows* and *The Hurricane*, its violence is made explicit in *King Kong* in the clear analogy between guns and camera. Interestingly enough, Malinowski himself uses a hunting metaphor: "But the Ethnographer has not only to spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them. He must be an active huntsman, and drive his quarry into them" (2002, 8). *King Kong* seems to suggest that in order to record the other objectively and transparently, the latter has to be turned into a visual spectacle and thereby killed off. Significantly, as the live King Kong is exhibited in a Broadway theatre, the audience does not react positively, even before he breaks free from his chains; it is only after he has been killed that he draws the masses. On his tropical island, climbing to heights marked Kong's power; on the corresponding island of Manhattan, climbing to the Empire State Building marks his defeat. Used to dominating everything on land, he is

powerless in the face of an attack from the air; if he was first captured on the border of island and sea, his defeat is completed at the new border of (is)land and sky, just a few years before the announcement of PanAm flights to Pacific Islands caused public concern that the pristine isolation of South Sea islands would now be destroyed for good (cf. *NYT*, 21 March, 1937).



***King Kong* (1933): scopophilia and representational violence**

I would argue, then, that the final shot of Kong's dead body can be read as a comment on the representational violence of cinema: Carl Denham's picture, as it were, has finally been made, but at the price of the death of its subject. As in the case of Porter's wars on Nukuhiva, the boundary is violently crossed and thus never really crossed at all. To return to our earlier letter to the editor, the giant ape is, for a while, quite literally out of frame, just to be framed and caught on the screen for good by the end of the film. At Kong's death, Denham comments that "beauty killed the beast", ostensibly referring to Ann. But beauty has indeed killed the beast also in a different sense if understood as an aesthetic principle. Read in this way, *King Kong* reveals the more disturbing aspects lurking behind the glamorous image of the tropical island, demonstrating just how large an apparatus it takes to make palm trees and romantic pineapples mask military violence and economic exploitation, and how easily the hazy picture across the border, viewed from the water, can always fall out of frame again.

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Summary

This paper discusses the role of the border of the island as a complex aesthetic zone in the journals of early European and American navigators in the South Seas (such as George Robertson, James Cook, Benjamin Morrell and Charles Wilkes) and in 1920s/1930s American films set on tropical islands. The fascination of the early explorers' descriptions of islands as viewed from the water, across a distance that is physical as much as cultural, resides in the entanglement of perception, expectation and imagination that marks these journeys as both intense and profoundly uncertain visual experiences. In the 1920s, US-American representations of tropical islands gained new currency as American tourists trooped to the South Seas.

As I argue, the strong visuality of the early accounts is one of the reasons why cinema could so readily pick up on them. In films like *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1929) and *The Hurricane* (1937), the imaginative transformation in the gaze from the water is associated with the camera as it explores the island in lateral tracking shots. These films cast a critical look on contemporary Western enthusiasm for 'exotic' cultures and locations in which they nevertheless participate. Resonating with contemporary anthropological and documentary film practices, emphasizing authentic representation of native cultures (Malinowski and Flaherty, respectively), they nevertheless point to the camera's own crossing of the island's border as an act of appropriation.

This appropriation becomes explicit in *King Kong* (1933) as, armed with cameras and guns, the diegetic film crew violently crosses the borders of/on the island. Significantly, it is only after Kong's death at the highest point of another island (Manhattan) and at another border, now between land and sky, that he fascinates the masses as an aesthetic spectacle. The film, then, meditates on the relations between border crossing, death and the production of aesthetics.

Keywords: island, South Seas, border aesthetics, camera, cultural contact, perception, anthropology, tourism